

# Reminiscences of My Boyhood

## My Father's First Car

### in Roslyn

(Ed. note: This is the second of a collection of stories written by Roslyn Village Historian Roy W. Moger.)

Today we take the automobile for granted. Almost everyone has one that wants one. Almost everyone can drive, and driver education in high school assures that everyone who drives, drives well.

Today, almost everyone leaves his car outside in the weather all night the year round and expects it to start the instant the key is the starter button. How often I am annoyed when on a cold day in winter my car won't start at least on the second try. How annoyed we are when a tire goes flat, even when it goes flat while standing still in the yard and all we have to do is get out the jack, jack up the wheel, take out the tire iron, remove the hub cap, unscrew five nuts, take off the wheel and replace it with the tire in the trunk which is already mounted on a wheel. And then, replace the nuts and the hub cap and drive off to the gas station to have the tire repaired. Later, if we want the tire returned to its original position, the gas station attendant replaces it for us.

We also complain about the cost of automobiles today. We usually choose our new car on the basis of price and looks. Automobile manufacturers stress seating comfort, upholstery, color-combinations and appearance, and gas consumption.

It was somewhat different in 1909, when my father bought his first car, a seven passenger Knox, built in Springfield, Mass. It cost \$3,500, which was a lot of money when bread sold for 10 cents a loaf, the round trip fare on the railroad from Roslyn to New York City was less than \$1, and our town tax was less than \$5.

My father's Knox was a touring car with a collapsible top. There were limousines with hard tops, but they were extremely expensive and they, too, would be kept under cover when not in use, just as cars with collapsible tops, or no tops at all, were. The year 1909, I'm told, was the first year that windshields were standard equipment on some cars.

Father could not seat himself behind the steering wheel and step on the starter for there was no self starter. He had to set the gas and spark levers on the quadrant on the steering wheel post at the center of the steering wheel. Then, he would get in front of the car and turn the crank to start the motor. This usually took several turns of the crank, but it might take several turns after several

turns, having adjusted the settings of the gas and spark levers to get the right combination. This, of course, was in the spring, summer or fall. We did not take the car out in the winter.

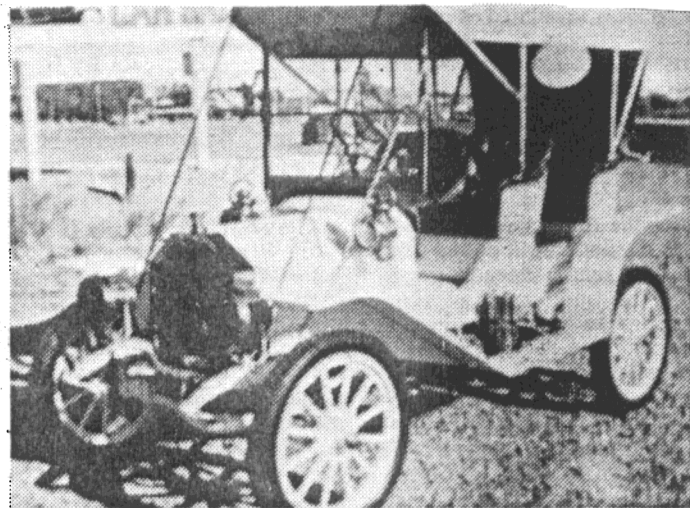
Once the weather turned cold in the fall, the car was raised off the garage floor on four jacks, one for each wheel. A large cloth tarpaulin was put over the entire car to protect it from dust. This, of course, was done after the brass trim had been polished and protected, the water drained from the radiator, and all the moving parts greased.

I don't remember when it was, but on one of our trips to Riverhead, Long Island, we made the trip, a two-day journey, with only one flat tire. It was a milestone in the life of the family. On previous trips, we had at least one flat tire going each way, if not more.

A flat tire did not just mean jacking up the wheel with the flat tire, removing it and replacing it with a spare wheel and tire. Instead, it meant jacking up the wheel, removing the tire and rim from the wheel, removing the tire from the rim, the tube from the tire, finding the leak in the tube, and the nail or whatever had punctured the tire, removing it from the tire, getting out the tire repair kit and putting a patch on the tube, putting a boot in the tire to cover the hole, replacing the tube in the tire, putting the tire back on the rim and putting it all back on the wheel. No, the job is not done yet.

The tire must be pumped up. The tire-pump hose is attached to the valve stem of the tube and the tire is pumped up by hand to a pressure of 70 pounds. All the time, everyone present is hoping against hope that the tire patch will hold when the jack is removed from under the wheel and the tire has to support the weight of the car. For if it doesn't, the whole process will have to be repeated. I can assure you, all this was not done in a few minutes, and the exercise was indeed a test of family tempers.

Another problem which has been forgotten over the years has to do with headlights. Father couldn't just turn a switch or push a button to turn on the headlights. It is difficult for us today to imagine that turning on the headlights at dusk was a major problem. It is hard to believe the nervous tension that built up between my father and mother as light



1910 Surrey Model 10 Buick is an example of the cars of the day—ed.

faded and darkness began to settle about us. Father tried to put off the fatal moment as long as possible. Mother, knowing full well the difficulties involved, especially after dark, kept trying to suggest possible stopping places to perform the operation. Yes, it was an operation, usually requiring two persons. It usually took both father and mother to accomplish this feat which we now do automatically without giving the matter much thought.

When finally it grew so dark that father could not see the ruts and pot holes in the road or even the road itself, he would pull the car over to the side of the road and stop. Both father and mother would get out and go to the front of the car. I had learned sometime before I can remember to stay in the car and keep quiet. Father would then open both headlights i.e. swing open the glass on the

front of the headlight which was held in a brass frame attached to the headlight with a hinge and held closed with a spring latch. He would strike a match and try to keep it burning until he could get it to ignite the gas coming from the nozzle. The match would be blown out by the wind. After numerous attempts he would ask mother to stand behind him and hold open her duster (a special light weight overgarment to protect ones clothes from the dust caused by other cars traveling on dirt roads) to shield the match from the wind.

That decision usually succeeded in making it possible for him to get the headlight lighted and closed. Having accomplished this, there was the second headlight to be lighted. The procedure was gone through again. Father's

decision to call mother for aid was often based on his supply of matches, or so it seemed to me.

Now both headlights being lighted, he had to light the tail light and the two side lamps on each side of the windshield. These three were kerosene lamps. The

side lamps were necessary in case the headlights went out due to

failure in the acetylene gas supply or because of a sudden bump or jarring motion of the car. These lights were necessary so that our car could be seen by approaching vehicles in the dark. Driving at night was an adventure during the first quarter of this century.

I believe that I mentioned that our car had a windshield as standard equipment. To say the least, I am sure it made driving much more pleasant for it protected the driver and others from dust and dirt, insects, wind and rain. It meant that the driver and the passengers no longer had to wear goggles. When it rained, however, no provision had been made to wipe it clear of water. Father had two alternatives. One was to open the windshield so the driver could look out. The other was to stop and

wipe the windshield clear of water by hand, only to have it get wet again as soon as we started to drive. Thus, when caught in the rain, we usually tried both these alternatives, stopping and starting again and again, or driving very slowly so as not to get too wet.

Speaking of rain reminds me that I should mention side curtains. If it began to rain hard, we were not able to just roll up the side windows for there were no side windows to roll up unless you

were in a limousine. When it rained hard we had to stop and put on the side curtains which were stored under the back seat. Of course, I have assumed that the top was up. If it wasn't, that, of course, became the first priority.

Neither putting up the top nor putting on the side curtains was an easy job. I guess one person could put on the side curtains eventually, but it took two persons to put up the top. It was heavy and both sides had to be coordinated. Mother played a very decided role in these operations. I can remember sitting in awe and amazement during these operations and keeping very, very quiet.

If driving at night was an adventure, driving in the rain was even more so. If it rained long and hard on dirt roads, they became a mass of mud. The tires had no treads as tires do today. They were smooth and as the mud got slippery the tires lost traction so that it became necessary to put chains on the rear wheels. This was an operation too traumatic for me to describe even at this late date. I will leave it to the reader's imagination: heavy rain, muddy road, heavy tire chains to be wrapped around the two rear tires and properly fastened so that they wouldn't come off and be left behind lost in the mud. Needless to say, the windshield wiper and the non-skid tire tread were a blessing to the motorist. The first windshield wiper was operated by hand from inside the car. Indeed it was a blessing. It was so important to successful driving in the rain that my father was very suspicious of the power-driven wipers and wanted an inside handle available in case the power should fail.

I must not neglect to explain the procedures that took place before we took the car out of the garage to take even a short trip. First my parents planned ahead, for it took several hours to get the car ready to be taken out of the garage. The entire family was involved in getting the car ready and each member of the family had a job. Today, every few months, or every so many miles, we take our car to the service station and have the attendant service the car. Not then, Father's job was to check the air in the tires and pump them up to the required pressure by hand if they needed it. He checked the gasoline, the oil, and the water and put in the required amounts of each as needed from the supplies he had on hand. Then he checked all the grease cups on all the moving parts and added grease where needed.

While he was doing that, my mother and I, when I was old enough, wiped the dust off the body with feather dusters. We then polished all the brass — and there was a great deal of brass — the hub caps, the radiator, crank handle, the brake handle and the gear shift handle, the door handles, the steering wheel post, the steering-wheel spokes, the horn, all the lamps, the rear view mirror, all the instruments on the dash board, the windshield frame, etc., etc. All this was done whether we were going shopping in Mineola, taking a trip to Brooklyn to visit my grandmother, or taking an overnight trip to Riverhead.

On our return, if there was time enough before dark, or, at the latest the very next morning, the cleaning, dusting, and polishing was repeated. We took very good care of the car.

I was two years old when father bought the Knox and nine years old when it was traded for an Oakland Roadster in 1916. I never remember the Knox being dirty more than over night. It was always as neat and trim and polished as a modern volunteer fire engine. The Rescue Hook and Ladder Company No. One and the Roslyn Highlands Hook & Ladder, Engine and Hose Co. continue the tradition with their equipment that I remember of the early automobile.